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ON THE CHOICE OF SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS.

BY H. J. TURNER.

WHEN on all hands we hear the government schools discussed, as if they were of the first importance in the country, it is surely good for us to consider earnestly the best schools for our own children. It is easier to choose a good school for a boy than for a girl. Supposing that you are a middle-class parent, not overburdened with riches, and with three or four children to educate, you know thereabouts the position in life you expect your boy to take; according to this position must be his training, and the companions he makes; and given this knowledge the question is settled thus: "The *boy* must go to school, and he must go to the best I can afford, and from Eton downwards I can take my choice." With a girl the matter is different; having disposed of the boy, you are apt to think the girl is of not so much consequence; either she "comes out" and marries, or hopes to, and at the worst she can always earn her own living in some way if needful. I say you are apt to think this, but I am addressing this little paper to the parent who looks on both boys and girls as living souls, with equal rights to live and work, and who faces the fact that girls in England can only half of them expect to marry, and only half can expect to have money enough left them by their parents to live on, supposing they do not marry, as with the best possible intentions they may not do. I say, then, the parent who realizes this, thinks earnestly what is best for his girl's future, as well as his boy's. Now it is in very few middle-class homes that a thoroughly good education can be carried on after a girl is twelve years old, and even given the desirable surroundings, the lack of companionship is a real evil to growing children. I conclude, then, that the father and mother are seriously thinking of sending the girl to school, but have no idea, where.

Now, before going further, I should like to say one word to

parents on preparing their children's minds for the great leap into the world, which going to school is to these young things. One hears so often the threat, when all kinds of punishment have been tried, "Well, you'll have to go to school, as you're so naughty," suggesting a place, peopled by bad children, and tyrants engaged in punishing them. Thus a strong-minded child begins school-life with defiance, and a timid one with terror. We English are nothing if not money-loving; at least, it is generally the lever which moves our world, and children quickly catch the spirit of their elders, so that if a parent says both to boys and girls, "I hope soon to send you to school, which will cost me a great deal of money, but I hope you will repay me by making the best possible use of all the advantages you will enjoy there, and do all you can to prepare yourselves beforehand, so that you may learn more quickly when you do enter," the children would regard school as a place, where, whatever hardships might have to be endured, and the leaving home is no small one to begin with, they would feel there was something to be gained for themselves and "father," and would set to work to gain it in most instances.

Now as to the choice of the school. There is a certain advantage, as we all know, in sea air for children, for a certain time every year, and if you can find all the other requisites, I would always advise that girls be sent to school near the sea. That this is becoming more general every year, those who are interested in the future mothers of our race will be glad to see. The amount of work which can be done without fatigue in the pure air by the sea is far greater than inland, so that given the same educational advantages, the girl near the sea has a better chance of success than the girl in a town, and can gain certificates and keep her roses as well. Thinking then that health is the first consideration, which will be granted by most people, remembering that the girl will be from home at a critical time in her life, and that a strong healthy child often becomes to a certain extent delicate for a year or two, we will consider our choice merely from a sanitary point of view, if I may so call it; and here I may add another word of caution.

Incredible as it may seem, I know many parents place their children in schools they have never seen themselves,

and with persons of whom they know nothing; on such an important subject see everything for yourself. If you have heard of a school through an agency, of which there are many reliable ones, or through an advertisement, or through friends, write for a prospectus, to see if the terms are within your means, and the style what you require; and then, without making an appointment, go to the school, notice the surroundings, the windows, the servant who opens the door, and the room you are shown into, and the kind of woman who greets you. Many of the mistresses of really good schools are themselves, though clever, intelligent women, lacking in that good breeding which we so much desire in our own girls. A nervous or vulgar woman will be most likely to show you any fault of manner she may possess, if called upon unexpectedly to meet "a parent," and these very faults are most infectious to those in her charge. Then do not be content with the drawing-room, but ask to see school-rooms, dining-hall, and above all bedrooms; do not entertain the idea of a school in which separate rooms or cubicles are not to be found; the small double-bed, beloved of the old-fashioned school-mistress, and the source of half the evil of school-girl life, cannot be tolerated for a moment. Notice the atmosphere of the house, if thermometers are to be seen, and the house feels dry and comfortable, as well as airy; feel the beds, as spring mattresses and good blankets are essential. If the mistress is wise, she will ask one of the elder girls to go round with you, of whom you can also ask questions as to the life and work of the girls, and notice how she speaks and moves. If you can see all the girls at work so much the better. See if there is a garden, generally not a very beautiful one is to be expected by the sea, but at least a piece of private ground, where the girls can play, and read, and garden, and swing, "all to themselves."

So far we have only considered the physical well-being of the girl. Now for the mental equipment. Unfortunately, our high-class schools are not under government inspection, and in many of them, otherwise satisfactory, the standard of work is shockingly low, and many young ladies, finished at fashionable schools, know less of the elements of mathematics and literature than their mothers' housemaids. Without

entering into the discussion as to the desirability of a girl's working for public examinations (although there is no doubt that such work gives her a far greater interest in her school career, and, wisely conducted, is no injury to health), unless the school recognises the university standard, say of Oxford (that, being more classical than mathematical, is generally an easier one for girls to reach), you have no guarantee that your money, and your daughter's time will not be frittered away, by careless teaching on the one side, or idleness on the other. It is not uncommon to find an *uneducated* girl, from a fashionable school, speak of concerts, theatres, late dinners, fancy work, &c., and she will be unable to write a correct English letter, keep her accounts, or translate a simple French sentence. Assuming that your daughter will leave school at 17 or 18 years of age, if she has passed the Oxford or Cambridge Senior Local, or worked for it, even if she has not passed in every subject, you may be assured that she is well grounded for whatever work is in store for her in the future. Therefore do not be content to choose a school where the head girls do not reach this standard. Make the Royal Academy your standard of music, and South Kensington for drawing, that is, see that the best is aimed at in the school for *all* the pupils, not striving to push on one girl with abnormal powers, but a healthy high level, of which you can judge, by seeing the school list of passes.

Now with regard to the moral and religious tone of the school, choose one in which there is dogmatic Christian teaching, of the Church to which you yourself belong. A school aiming to catch all parties does much towards undermining the faith of young minds, which must grasp something firmly, at any rate to begin with, and every Christian parent should see that the child shall learn from the home point of view, always supposing the home is Christian. Here I should like to add a word to the members of the Church of England. While choosing a school where Church doctrines *only* are taught, and well taught, many a mother has had bitter reason to regret the tremendous influence gained, through the practice of confession, by the clergy over young and ardent minds. The clergyman is often a man surrounded by a kind of divine halo to the

school-girl, and many men of the extreme High Church party regard a girls' school as a hot-bed for forcing the practice of confession, and with it a secret defiance to parents and teachers, and a sort of holy secret between themselves and these girls, over whom they gain a life-long hold. This is, alas, no imaginary danger, and as the clergyman has much power in recommending or denouncing schools in his parish, there is often a temptation for a mistress to fall into this evil. This I consider the one great drawback to the otherwise excellent Sisters' schools, in every instance.

To return to physical well-being, you cannot invite yourself to stay in the school to test the cuisine, but the food in all good schools must be good, or they would never succeed, and in this matter there has been great improvement of late years. Children will soon show by their faces if they are not well fed, and you can judge for yourself by seeing the girls, if they look well nourished. Questions on all these subjects can be asked in a kindly pleasant way, not to hurt the feelings of the poor woman, who, perhaps is doing her best, even if she does not reach your standard, and the very questions you ask will help her to see what is required, and make her try to raise her school to a higher level.

And now supposing you have met with the school which you think is suitable in all these points, write to, or if possible, see some of the references given, but be sure that they are parents whose girls have been for a fairly long time in the school. Do not be led astray by Bishop this, or Dean that, or Sir the other, who have perhaps been induced to lend their names, but who know nothing of the working of the school in any way. Granted again that all you hear is satisfactory, send your girl without fear, but first tell her what she must be prepared for, the advantages she must try to gain, and the evils she must avoid. Speak to her about the kind of girls she should choose as friends, and warn her against choosing too quickly. And above all tell her plainly and seriously the physical facts of her own body, the ignorance of which leads to endless curiosity in the bold, and terror in the timid. A girl who has been properly prepared for school life by her mother, is not likely to join in improper conversation, even if tempted; with knowledge

properly imparted, comes modesty in nearly every case. Part with your girl bravely and cheerfully, and write to her often during the first fortnight; and here may I add a word about mothers' letters. Let your letters be loving, helpful, wise, to guide your child rightly; not the selfish outpouring of little home worries, servants, &c, which make the children restless and miserable. Unless there is dangerous illness at home, and the child is to return at once, say nothing of the little home ailments; it is torture to a loving child to think she is not at home to help the sufferer. Then for both girls and boys how much harm is done by the deadly lack of interest in their work when they return for the holidays. After the first rush round the dear home, and embraces to the dear ones, the children want to tell you what they have done, and show you the certificates gained, the needlework or carving done, the books full of good or bad writing. These things have made up the sum of their lives for many weeks, and if they are never regarded at home, it takes half the interest away. The appreciation, and praise or warning, show them that you, as well as the teachers, think these things important.

On the subject of pocket-money, which always seems a vexed question, I have seen excellent results from allowing the children to earn it for the next term, by the school report brought home; every "very good" meant not only so many marks, but so many shillings for the future. This is simply preparing them for the battle of life, which all must fight in one way or another. I have rather digressed from my original idea, which was the *choice* of a school, but, having done so, I would further say—never discuss the faults of the school, or teachers, or the items of the school bill, with your children, hear and see all, and write direct to head master or mistress on every cause of complaint; they are faithful to you in the hearing of your children, whatever mistakes you may make, and they may at least expect as much in return from you. Now to return to your choice, I would end by saying, be very careful in making your selection, but, *having* made it, let nothing but the most serious cause, such as prolonged ill-health of the child, induce you to remove her until her school life is ended. There is a fatal habit among the middle classes, of taking children, particularly girls,

from one school to another, for the most absurd reasons. I know of one case where a doctor sent his daughter to a school which was immediately chosen by an auctioneer in the same town for his child; the doctor's daughter was at once removed, the auctioneer's also, and followed to the next chosen; so these unfortunate children, before the age of fourteen, had been in five different schools, and had barely learnt to read and write. Nor is this an uncommon case. On the most frivolous pretexts girls are removed; have they failed in an examination, or come out low down in their class, try a change of schools; have they worked up well and taken certificates, give them still greater advantages. I have in my mind, as I write, the cases of two girls who were doing very well in a small school, and for that cause were sent to a larger one, and never passed another examination. The girl who has worked steadily up to the top of her school without any change, is the girl best fitted for her life's work. The question of a year or two abroad is often considered, and there is no doubt that it is an excellent finish to a girl's education; but the woman who knows *anything* of continental life, does not send her daughter before seventeen, at least, when, if she has steadily worked in a good English school, she is ready to profit by foreign life, without gaining the many undesirable habits so easily learned by younger or more ignorant girls.

Does this paper appear to contain advice which no one needs; because everyone does what it suggests, and leaves undone what it condemns? After many years' experience these thoughts have presented themselves to my mind as being needful in many instances to utter. A case of choice of a school was told me the other day which bears on the subject. Enter overdressed mamma, in enormous hat and plumes; presenting overdressed girl of fourteen:—"I have brought my dear girl, Mrs. —, to leave her at your school for a little while, to see if she likes it. If she likes it she will stop, if not, she will come home at once. She need not do any lessons she does not like, and I hope you don't teach religion, because I want her to grow up with an open mind, and judge for herself what church she will join. I hope *all* your girls are ladies, because we are only accustomed to the best society. She must not sleep at the top of the house for

fear of fire, nor too near the ground floor for fear of burglars. She would like to write to two very handsome young men, her cousins, for she says she cannot live without them. She has no musical taste, but I don't mind about her learning anything but the piano, *that* I wish her to excel in, and if you have a good music master, and always let her practise on a really good piano, I am sure she could play. She will never be driven, but may be led by love." All this in a breathless high-pitched key, to the bewildered school-mistress, while the girl murmurs, "yes, darling, of course, dear," with a condescending air of patronage, better imagined than described. This is an actual conversation which took place lately. As might be expected, the school did not suit the young lady, and the mamma was indignant. Not to such parents is this paper addressed, but to those who are truly the spiritual and moral, as well as physical parents of their children; and who know that a good education is the one thing that cannot be taken from their dear ones, whatever time may bring, and that "when house and lands are gone and spent, then learning is most excellent."

[There are points in the above paper upon which the Editor especially invites discussion.]